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Author(s)	Ruane, Lorna
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Generation Y females online: insights from brand narratives

Lorna Ruane and Elaine Wallace

Department of Marketing, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand the relationships Generation Y females have with fashion brands online. Specifically, it examines the role of the internet and social networks in these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – Narrative interviews were employed to gather data from Generation Y women. Analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis.

Findings – Two main themes emerged from the data: the importance of social media and the influence of the internet. Findings suggest social networks have a significant influence on the dynamics of brand consumption and inform our understanding of females' online shopping behaviours.

Research limitations/implications – A qualitative methodology was utilised to elicit insights from consumers. This allowed participants to express their thoughts in their own words, which provided rich data for analysis.

Practical implications – We provide guidance for marketing managers seeking to harness social networks to market brands. Findings illustrate the role of social networks in driving brand consumption among Generation Y women, and highlight the criticality of the social network as a source of information and reassurance for brand choices. Further, we identify concerns about online shopping, and provide suggestions for online retailers seeking to augment consumers' shopping experiences.

Originality/value – This study offers insights into Generation Y females' use of the internet and social networks for brand consumption. To date such research has been mainly quantitative. Further, Generation Y has been neglected in the marketing literature. This paper addresses these gaps and illustrates the significant impact social media has on the behaviour of female consumers.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Internet, Social networking sites, Women, Influence, Narratives, Online shopping, Generation Y, Females, Brand relationships, Fashion, Social media

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper adopts a narrative approach to explore Irish Generation Y women's use of the internet for purchasing fashion brands. The use of narratives to seek consumers' views on fashion brands and brand relationships is prevalent in previous studies (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Schembri *et al.*, 2010; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Zayer and Neier, 2011). From its foundation, the internet progressed from being a novel technology to a valuable channel for information, communication, and shopping (Brashear *et al.*, 2009). Fashion is second only to books when shopping online, despite the fact that fashion products are largely experience goods that differ significantly in relation to price, quality and fit (Hansen and Jensen, 2009; Nielsen, 2008; Peterson *et al.*, 1997). Globally internet retail sales increased from $105 billion in 2004 to $248 billion in 2009 (Euromonitor, 2010). Ireland's online market has demonstrated continuous annual growth and, with an estimated value in 2011 of €2 billion, exhibits no significant impact of the recession (Mintel, 2012). With online shopping continuing to increase (Akhter, 2012), understanding consumer behaviour

online is crucial. Narratives allow consumers to talk at length about their personal experiences, hence, they are a valuable tool for examining consumer behaviour online.

As an "always-on" medium, the internet allows consumers to buy what they want, when they want, from wherever they want, regardless of geographic location (Mintel, 2012; Suki *et al.*, 2008). Online shopping offers consumers unique opportunities to locate, compare, and customise products to their needs. Shopping online is also more comfortable than conventional shopping (Suki *et al.*, 2008). However, shopping online is riskier because many of the characteristics of goods important in consumer decision making, such as fit and quality, are difficult to present online, and product descriptions are often insufficient (Grewal *et al.*, 2004; Kim and Forsythe, 2009). Business and researchers remain interested in how consumers engage with the internet as retailers continue to use a multichannel format to do business (Brashear *et al.*, 2009; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004). Therefore, further research is needed to understand how consumers use the internet. Specifically, there have been calls for research with a non-US view of internet usage and behaviour (Brashear *et al.*, 2009). Based on Irish female Generation Y consumers, this paper addresses this gap by using qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of how women engage with the internet when shopping.

Generation Y, individuals born between 1977 and 1994 (Noble *et al.*, 2009), comprise over 1.3 million people, or 28 per cent of the population of Ireland (Mintel, 2011). They are technology savvy (Yeaton, 2008), and the largest and first truly global consumer segment (Kim *et al.*, 2010). In terms of financial value total expenditure on fashion in Ireland in 2010 was over €2.5 billion (Mintel, 2011). Generation Y, comprising over a quarter of the population, constitute a considerable amount of the market by spending two-thirds of their money on clothing (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006). Their sheer numbers and spending power transform the market at every life stage they enter (Morton, 2002), and despite the global downturn, Generation Y are spending as they are free from financial commitments such as mortgages (Ma *et al.*, 2012; Steiner, 2008; Yarrow and O'Donnell, 2009). They love fashion, trendy products, status brands, and shopping (Tran, 2008), and therefore, present a relevant segment for studying online shopping. Despite their value as consumers, Generation Y have been neglected in the literature (Charters *et al.*, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2010; Sheahan, 2005). Furthermore, little research has focused on a specific gender of Generation Y, particularly online. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on Generation Y women. Research shows society places greater importance on women's physical appearance compared with men (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006), and women are more likely to use clothing and fashion for self-definition and self-identity (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006; Gould and Stern, 1989). As online shopping affords consumers the ability to obtain very specific or niche products, hard to find in traditional retailers (Mintel, 2012), the internet allows women to satisfy their self-expression needs through unique brand offerings.

This research contributes to our understanding of consumer relationships with online fashion brands. Findings from 14 narrative interviews inform the study. Adopting a narrative approach allowed participants to express their experiences, while the researchers were able to comprehend their consumption behaviour (Shankar *et al.*, 2001). This research is unique as, unlike the majority of previous online shopping research, it employs qualitative methodology which allows consumers to describe their online shopping experiences in their own words. A comprehensive review of the literature is now provided. Subsequently, the narrative methodology is described and

the findings are reported. The paper concludes with a discussion presenting research implications, limitations and directions for future research.

Literature review
Branding, brand loyalty and brand relationships
A brand is a cluster of functional and emotional values promising a unique and welcome experience for its stakeholders (de Chernatony *et al.*, 2006). Central to the success of any brand is the enduring relationships a brand creates with its loyal consumers. Brand loyalty is a deeply held commitment to re-purchase or re-patronise a product/service consistently, causing repetitive purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour (Oliver, 1999). Brand loyalty is a company's most enduring asset and a primary goal of relationship marketing (Dalziel *et al.*, 2011; Pan *et al.*, 2012). By creating and maintaining loyalty, a brand develops long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Pan *et al.*, 2012). A brand relationship is a bond that brings the brand seller and buyer together (Schultz and Schultz, 2004). This bond provides benefits for the consumer and the brand. For example, while loyalty is valuable for fashion brands, simultaneously, fashion allows consumers to express themselves. The growth of the internet enables self-expression as it allows consumers to access virtually any item, regardless of their location (Mintel, 2012). Consumers can obtain unique brands not easily accessible offline, allowing them to communicate their desired self-image (Mintel, 2012). Exploring consumers' online fashion brand relationships is important as relationships affect, and are affected by, the contexts in which they are embedded (Fournier, 1998). Due to the interactive potential of this medium, which provides a facility for consumers and brands to communicate directly with one another regardless of distance or time, it is likely consumer-brand relationships differ online (Park *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the relationships consumers develop with brands online.

Traditional retailers without an online presence are a rarity (Mintel, 2012). However, the online and offline retail environments have many differences (Seock and Norton, 2007). Offline, consumers have face-to-face interaction with salespeople and may pay for their goods with cash (Akhter, 2012). Conversely, this interaction is not possible online and consumers are required to provide private information and details before the transaction can be completed. Consumers develop concerns about privacy, fearing how their information will be used and the possibility of credit card fraud. Further risks include an inability to touch before purchasing and problems returning products that fail to meet expectations (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2000; Kau *et al.*, 2003). However, the internet is also a powerful tool that presents several benefits. Convenience is important as consumers save time by searching from a wide selection of products from home, which are then delivered to their door (Grewal *et al.*, 2004; Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2000). Online, consumers have access to vast amounts of product and price information, and can compare and contrast with relative ease (Xu and Paulins, 2005; Grewal *et al.*, 2004). Crowd avoidance, low prices, and easier and quicker access to alternatives provide additional benefits online (Seock and Norton, 2007; Xu and Paulins, 2005).

Although past research focused on consumers' attitudes and behaviour when shopping online, no studies, to the researchers' knowledge, focused on Generation Y, the largest consumer segment in the world. Further, no studies focused on Generation Y women's use of the internet for purchasing fashion products, despite the fact

Generation Y love fashion and shopping (Tran, 2008). This paper aims to address this gap by exploring the behaviour and attitudes Generation Y women have towards purchasing fashion brands online.

Fashion

Fashion is a cyclical reflection of social, cultural, and environmental characteristics, unique to a certain point of time in a particular geographical setting, in addition to playing a crucial role in complementing one's self-image (Azuma and Fernie, 2003). Fashion is a self-expressive phenomenon and consumers' relationships with fashion brands are unique because they allow consumers to present their desired self-image through the brands they possess (Lawson, 2011; Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012). Fashion brands are also rich in meaning and serve as important tools in consumers' lives (Papista and Dimitriadis, 2012). Consequently, consumers form different relationships with fashion brands to the extent that the primary way they communicate is through brands (Lawson, 2011). As the consumption of fashion brands is strongly linked with the self-concept and satisfying the ego needs of the purchaser (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2000; Hansen and Jensen, 2009), research suggests consumers associate higher levels of risk when purchasing fashion online (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2000). For example, consumers buying online cannot try or hold the product to assess its quality before purchase and cannot interact with a reference group for purchase advice. Conversely, the internet enables consumers to source fashion brands unavailable offline, offering new ways to self-express and self-present through consuming unique brands online (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Shopping online has decidedly different characteristics to shopping offline. These characteristics may contribute to consumers' intention to shop online, while others may discourage them. Generation Y use technology to connect with the world in more diverse ways and greater numbers than any other cohort (Walter, 2012). Their familiarity with technology, combined with their substantial market power and their possibility of becoming loyal customers if successful brand relationships are developed and maintained, provided strong rationale for exploring Generation Y and their behavioural intentions for online shopping. As Generation Y are technology savvy individuals, they are ideal potential internet shoppers. Therefore, further research is needed to explore their online fashion shopping.

The female consumer

Historically, shopping and fashion consumption has been considered a female issue. Women generally have more awareness of, and interest in, clothing compared with men (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006). Women are more engaged with fashion (O'Cass, 2000) and more likely to use clothing and fashion to express their self-identity (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006). These gender differences are explained by the greater importance society places on women's physical appearance compared with men (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006). Gender differences are also evident in internet usage as women in Western countries use the internet 17 percent more than men every month (Madrigal, 2012).

Previous research suggests gender differences with respect to clothing shopping orientation and online purchasing (Noble *et al.*, 2009). Women buy new fashions, persuade others to buy new fashions (Cho and Workman, 2011), are more conscious of brand names (Beaudoin and Lachance, 2006), and more involved in fashion and clothing than men (O'Cass, 2000). Studies continually show gender differences in internet usage (Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007; Pope *et al.*, 1999). In traditional retail

environments, women buy more products than men, influence 80 per cent of consumer purchases (Cho and Workman, 2011; Mitchell and Walsh, 2004) and make the majority of household purchases (Garbarino and Strahilevitz, 2004). Despite this, women were less likely to make purchases online and spent less when they did (Andrews *et al.*, 2007; Van Slyke *et al.*, 2002), because in the early days of the internet men had a greater interest in computing (Andrews *et al.*, 2007; Teo and Lim, 2000). This has changed as women now use the internet more than men (Madrigal, 2012).

Further, Irish women are far more likely to buy fashion online, with 51 per cent of women having purchased online in the past three months, compared to 28 per cent of men (Mintel, 2012). Despite this shift in buying behaviour, there is a dearth of research focusing exclusively on understanding women's online purchasing (Andrews *et al.*, 2007; Garbarino and Strahilevitz, 2004). Growing internet usage and adoption among Irish consumers, combined with improved e-commerce technology and payment methods available in the Irish market, have encouraged virtually all retailers to offer online services in the Irish market (Mintel, 2012). It has also resulted in greater adoption of online shopping in Ireland, and a noticeable increase in female consumers shopping online. Therefore, it is critical that researchers and practitioners understand what motivates women online, both those who already purchase online and those who do not, to gain insights into how to attract new customers. To guide this research, this paper asks: what are Generation Y female consumers' attitudes and behaviour towards online shopping for fashion brands?

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was taken in the collection of this data. Brand narratives were selected to elicit insights from Generation Y females. The use of narratives to seek consumers' views on fashion brands and brand relationships is consistent with the extant branding literature (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Schembri *et al.*, 2010; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Zayer and Neier, 2011). Similar studies advocate collecting between six and ten interviews (Coupland, 2005; Schembri *et al.*, 2010). McCracken (1988) states eight interviews is an appropriate number for a long interview. The researcher conducted four pilot studies, followed by 14 interviews with female Generation Y participants, in the west of Ireland in Autumn 2011. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 years and included students and working professionals (see Appendix). Participants were purposively sampled to maximize the chances of uncovering insights on important brand relationship phenomena (Fournier, 1998). Students at an Irish University were contacted by e-mail and asked to volunteer for participation in the research. To avoid a student bias, professionals were included in the study. These individuals were recruited in a local gym, which has a broad range of Generation Y members. The researcher approached every tenth person and asked for their participation. To ensure theoretical sampling, candidates selected were aged between 18 and 34 years, and answered "yes" to the screening question "Have you purchased a fashion brand in the last month?" A general screening question was deemed appropriate as the researchers did not want to lead the participants in any way.

Consistent with previous narrative studies (Fournier, 1998; Schembri *et al.*, 2010; Thompson and Haytko, 1997), interviews followed a conversational style, where participants largely set the course of the dialogue. With the exception of an opening question, the interviewer did not use predetermined questions. Questions and probes followed the course of the dialogue and were formulated in unison with the

participant's reflections (Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Insights gained throughout the process of interviewing aided in probing (Fournier, 1998; Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

To put participants at ease, interviews began with a brief overview of the purpose of the interview and by assuring confidentiality. Questions obtaining general background information followed (McCracken, 1988; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). The conversation moved to fashion by adapting the question Thompson and Haytko (1997) used in their fashion study – "When you think about fashion what comes to mind?" to "When you think about fashion or fashionable products what comes to mind?" This study adopts a phenomenological approach, and in keeping with the phenomenological interview techniques used by Thompson and Haytko (1997), in their study on fashion discourses, this question was employed to allow the dialogue to begin in an open-ended manner.

Consistent with Fournier and Yao (1997), images of brands generated by the researcher aided the course of the interviews. The images were used to stimulate and probe brand stories. Participants were shown pictures of brand logos and asked to describe what came to mind. To select appropriate logos for the study, the top Interbrand and social media brands were triangulated with a survey of 80 final year students at an Irish University. This ensured the brand images had salience for Generation Y. Students were asked to list the first three fashion brands that came to mind using unaided recall. 24 brand logos were used as prompts including "ASOS", "H&M", "Chanel" and "Apple". All the images were of brands with an online presence and brands that retail online. These images sparked conversation as participants discussed how these brands relate to their consumption habits and identity (Zayer and Neier, 2011). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes. Each interview was conducted in a private room with only the researcher and the participant present.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) in the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Hayes, 2000; Sayre, 2001; Schembri *et al.*, 2010). The formal analysis began with the researcher repeatedly reading and summarizing the entire data set. The summaries were then examined by looking for patterns that could develop and form themes and codes of analysis. As the analysis was inductive thematic analysis, the codes were data-driven and thus the themes depended on what emerged from the data. Coding was done by working systematically through the entire data set and identifying interesting data items that may form themes across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Codes were sorted into potential themes, and the relevant coded data extracts were collated within the identified themes. The coded data extracts were reviewed to consider whether they formed a coherent pattern. Subsequently, the extracts were reviewed in relation to the entire data set. Themes presented in the analysis were then defined and further refined. Two coders reviewed the data to ensure reliability. Inter-coder differences were resolved through discussion and codes were revised. The findings are now presented.

Findings

All participants had experience shopping online. Findings revealed participants consider the concept of "fashion" as encompassing five types of brands: clothing (Abercrombie & Fitch and Mulberry), retail (Topshop and New Look), sports (Adidas and Nike), beauty (MAC and Chanel), and Technology or "Gadget" brands (Apple and HTC). It was evident these brands are viewed as being "on trend" and fashionable, share a perceived

contribution to the self-concept, and have a role in self-presenting and creating a social impression. Two broad themes emerged from the findings and are now outlined.

(i) The impact of social media
Social media drives brand consumption. Findings suggest the emergence and popularity of social media has significantly impacted participants' fashion brand consumption. Consumers self-present in their daily lives by selecting clothes, hairstyles, and brands to impress others (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Findings indicate Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and Twitter, also enable self-presentation as individuals create online identities with fashion brands. The desire to self-present online is reflected in their resistance to wear an outfit once it has appeared on SNSs. Laura illustrates this:

> I don't like people seeing me wearing something twice. Facebook makes it worse. You're tagged in pictures so people see you wearing a dress twice on different nights out. If there wasn't any Facebook I'd wear my outfits more but I know people look at photos.

Social media drives consumption as participants constantly need to wear new and different clothing. Participants discussed this:

> Once you wear a dress it's all over Facebook and you can't wear it again (Julie).

> Once pictures are on Facebook, you're tagged, people know you're wearing the same dress, [...] So it's a lot harder to wear it again (Kate).

Being "tagged" refers to placing markers that identify those in the picture. This links the picture to the profile of each person tagged and their friends homepages. Once "tagged" in an image, participants are concerned about their Facebook friends viewing it and seeing what they are wearing, so they have no desire to wear the outfit again. This creates a need to continuously shop and update their wardrobes, which is why Laura is "addicted to and loves shopping online". She does not want to be seen wearing the same outfit twice, but also wants to stand out. The internet provides these women with access to, and allows them to draw inspiration from, different brands so they can self-present through SNSs. Therefore, Generation Y consume fashion brands to create a virtual impression – "You go out to look good because it's going to be on Facebook" (Laura). They dispose of these brands once they have appeared on SNSs as wearing them diminishes their self-image. Consequently, SNSs increase brand consumption as participants shop to keep up with fashion and create their desired self-image.

Social media as a source of inspiration. Through SNSs, participants are influenced by their friends, people who appear on their homepage, celebrities, and brands' social media pages. Participants use SNSs as a source of fashion ideas and inspiration, and so the social network becomes the aspirational reference group. They take these ideas and try to emulate them:

> If you saw an outfit on someone on Facebook it's easier to base your fashion on them, especially if you don't know them because you can get the exact same outfit and they'll never know. Social media makes it easier to get on their pages to see what they wear and use it for inspiration (Aoife).

> You get good ideas from other girls on Facebook. [...] It's a way of styling yourself (Julie).

> I love looking online at what celebrities are wearing or seeing other peoples unique style, I try to copy what they wear with a cheaper version (Laura).

> If I had a fashion idea, seeing it in pictures of celebrities on Twitter definitely influences me (Niamh).

Social media groups and brand pages provide additional sources of inspiration, enticing participants to shop online. Brands use SNSs to support the creation of brand communities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and to share product information with consumers who willingly follow and have an interest in the brand. SNSs also heighten the awareness of the brand as consumers who have not previously come into contact with brand may do so on SNSs:

> If you join groups on Facebook, that's where I saw the Pretty Dress Company, I like their clothes (Aisling).

SNSs influence participants' decision making process. This is important for marketing managers as posts on SNSs may make consumers aware of a need they were previously unaware of, allow them to engage in an information search through SNSs, and allows for evaluation of available alternatives. Therefore, it may benefit marketing managers to further research the role of the SNS as an information source for their brand. Further, SNSs may provide reassurance in instances of cognitive dissonance – for example seeing a fashion item worn differently on Facebook may provide positive reinforcement for the consumer. It may be beneficial for marketing managers to create Facebook pages for their fashion brands to allow for the formation of brand communities and provide a reassuring information source on SNSs.

Social media as an information source. SNSs also serve as information sources for where to shop and what to buy. Participants use SNSs for shopping the same way they use clothing web sites or catalogues:

> Facebook has a huge impact because you see pictures and it's as good as being on a clothing website, it shows you other people's fashion and you can look for the brand (Roisin).

Participants know by looking at an item what brand it is as they look to their online friends and celebrities to provide brand information:

> On Facebook when you're going through other people's pictures you associate what they're wearing with the brand. You can tell what brand it is (Niamh).

> Social media makes it easier to see what's out there and decide what outfits to put together. [...] With Twitter, celebrities are always tweeting pictures so you see what they're wearing and what brands they like (Aoife).

> Facebook is good because when you're looking at pictures, [...] you notice what people are wearing and use it as an information point to look for brands (Aisling).

Therefore, findings suggest participants use SNSs as information sources to gather information and guide fashion purchases. Through pictures on SNSs, SNSs replace fashion brand web sites as participants look for ideas and new fashion, select what they want to buy and then search for it online or offline. To optimise the use of SNSs as marketing tools, brand managers would benefit from better understanding the role of the visual images on SNSs for consumers and how these images influence buying decisions.

Social media offers reassurance. Participants indicated SNSs provide reassurance and give them confidence to wear new trends and brands. If they are unsure about

wearing a brand, seeing others wearing it on Facebook gives them the confidence and reassurance to wear it:

> With social media, I have my early fashion idea and it's reinforced if I see it in pictures on Facebook [...] when it's promoted on Facebook I'd have the confidence to wear it (Niamh).

This shows SNSs offer reassurance and confidence, similar to friends' opinions or compliments offline. Therefore, it suggests a change in social dynamic and a move away from the traditional forms of reassurance, with less importance placed on the opinions and influence of one's closest friends and more influence placed on those seen on SNSs. Facebook friends may not be close friends, yet they still offer reassurance. This is important because through the correct use of SNSs posts, brands could offer reassurance to followers and influence consumers to embrace their products both on and offline.

This theme illustrates the importance and influence of SNSs. These findings are of significant importance for brand managers because they elucidate the unique ways women interact with SNSs and their influence on consumption. For fashion brands, the impact of social media goes far beyond having a presence on SNSs. It is important brand managers are aware of this as SNSs provide other consumers with considerable power and influence. These findings illustrate how other consumers are active co-producers of the value and meaning of a brand, particularly with SNSs. Therefore, a brand's communications to its consumers are co-produced in consumer networks (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

(ii) The influence of the internet as a retail outlet
Although the role of the internet in e-commerce is long established, the following findings provided insights into Generation Y females' online shopping.

The internet fits with busy lifestyles. One of the key reasons participants shop online is this shopping medium fits with their lifestyles. Consumers are increasingly time poor, and the internet offers an efficient and convenient way to obtain products with minimal effort (Mintel, 2012). A primary motivation for shopping online is convenience (Brashear *et al.*, 2009; Donthu and Garcia, 1999; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004). Rather than spend time physically shopping, consumers find shopping online easier, more pleasant and less time consuming (Kau *et al.*, 2003; Girard *et al.*, 2003; Mintel, 2012). The following quotes illustrate this point:

> I like ASOS, I don't need to leave the house, I just look at the website, order, try it on when it arrives, and if I hate it, send it back. [...] It's so handy (Roisin).

> Online shopping is the best [...] I don't have time to go into town shopping. I work all weekend and have college during the week, so I just order online and it comes to my door. [...] If there was no internet, I wouldn't shop as much because I wouldn't have time (Laura).

Online shopping fits with participants' lifestyles and allows them to shop when it suits them, with less time, effort, and energy required. Additional findings illustrate how online shopping fits with participants' lifestyles and show that even if they cannot initially afford an item, a "saving function" means items can be saved on their profile, therefore requiring minimum effort to search for the item when they can purchase it:

> With ASOS I can make a whole outfit sitting in the library or at home, I don't have to move. It's really convenient, I look through to see what I want and save it so when I get money it's right there, I don't have to go back into town and look for it (Aoife).

The layout of web sites, such as ASOS, also make shopping online easier because participants can search by the product they want rather than searching through every item on offer in-store:

> The internet lays out every product, you can sort by dresses, or tops, but in a shop you have to look through everything, so it's better for looking at clothes and easier to buy (Laura).

The layout of web sites also fits with participants' lifestyles because it is easier, less time consuming and requires less effort to search online, which influences their consumption. To encourage repeat purchasing and entice women to purchase online, emphasis should be placed on ensuring ease of purchasing online. Marketing communication for retail web sites should also focus on its complementarity to a busy lifestyle. Further, retailers should ensure web site navigation is simple and allow consumers to save their choices for a later date. Creating personalised consumer "profiles" containing their fashion choices will encourage return visits to the site, further enticing women to shop online.

The internet as an information source and filtering tool. Consumers shop online to inform decision-making and evaluate choices (Seock and Norton, 2007). Participants use the internet for searching, comparing, and accessing information (Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004), and as a tool to filter the choices available offline. Emese illustrates how she uses brand web sites to filter options so she will not feel overwhelmed in-store:

> I feel lost because there's too many choices in-store. If I spend time online before I go shopping it makes more sense when I'm in the shop. I always check Next or New Look, then when I go into the shop I already have something in mind.

Browsing online before shopping offline allows Emese to decipher what is on offer. Too much choice is confusing and overwhelming for consumers as increasing the size of the choice set may weaken consumer preferences (Chernav, 2003). Searching online eliminates the possibility of this happening as participants evaluate available alternatives and select what they want before they enter the shop. Therefore, the internet provides a method for filtering and simplifying the choices available to consumers, which also provides consumers with an "edge" as they view fashion items ahead of their availability in-store. The preemptory online search was a common view throughout the findings:

> I love looking on ASOS, Reiss and Topshop to see what's coming in. Sometimes they have clothes online before in-store so you see what's coming in (Joanne).

> I browse online to see what's in the shops so I know if they have something I like. I went jean shopping recently and before I went I looked on Topshop and River Island to see if it was worth my time (Kate).

> If I was looking for something, I'll look online on Evans or Debenhams to see what they have. There's no point going shopping if they don't have anything (Antoinette).

> I look online, on Oasis or Warehouse, to see what they have before I go to the store. If I am going into town and don't know what's out there I might have to go to ten different shops to get an overview, but if I look online I can do it at home, pick what I like, and narrow down my search. [...] It saves time (Stephanie).

Therefore, it is important that a brand's online offerings are available to consumers offline. Managers who sell much of their merchandise through offline retail should

not overlook the role of the internet in influencing those purchases. The internet acts as a first stage for these consumers, and may influence whether they visit the store. Hence, it is essential that products are well presented online and accurately reflect how they look offline. As these women browse virtually before shopping offline, marketing managers are well advised to entice consumers to browse online to attract more consumers into their stores.

The internet enables impression management. Participants engage in online shopping because they do not want the same brands and outfits as others. This relates to their self-concept and how consumers wish to communicate and portray themselves as individuals through consuming brands (Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Laura explains:

> You find the best dresses on ASOS and no one has them. [. . .] They're totally different. They stand out and you won't find them in a shop. I hate buying dresses in a shop because somebody is guaranteed to be wearing them.

Laura shops online as there is a greater variety available, and thus, a higher possibility of finding "unique" clothes others cannot find offline. This allows her to stand out when socialising, which gives her confidence. As these consumers dislike wearing the same outfit twice, moving online offers a wider variety of unique, not easily attainable brands to satisfy their needs. Therefore, the self-concept has a strong influence on the relationships participants develop with fashion brands (Otieno *et al.*, 2005). These women favour brands that allow them to differentiate themselves from their peers, but it is also important they are not seen wearing something twice. The range and exclusivity of the internet gives them the edge over those who shop offline and have limited options. This is vital because people engage in consumption behaviour in part to construct their self-concepts and create their personal identity (Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). The internet provides variety with fashion brand choices, allowing participants to stand out and create their desired self-image. This allows them to feel at ease in the knowledge their purchases are not as easily accessible, and they are less likely to see others with them:

> If you have something important where you really want to be the only one in a particular outfit [. . .] the best thing is to go online. It has such a big variety. [. . .] New York Dresses is a good starting point, it has every dress you could imagine (Julie).

Therefore, to appeal to and target this cohort, it is important brands emphasise the uniqueness and exclusivity their online products may offer Generation Y women.

Change of social dynamic when shopping online. Shopping experience refers to recreational shoppers who enjoy shopping as a leisurely activity (Kaufman-Scarborough and Lindquist, 2002; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004). For many participants, shopping is an enjoyable social activity that allows them to interact with others. This is lost when shopping online:

> I like the physical experience of shopping, I go with a friend and we go for breakfast and lunch or a drink afterwards. It's not purely shopping, it's a whole day, the whole package (Stephanie).

Stephanie feels the experiences she enjoys offline are lost online, a sentiment echoed by Aishling:

> I love clothes and shopping. I love going in-store and trying them on, [. . .] I prefer that to sitting on my own at a computer looking at clothes.

Online, the brand experience changes as participants do not have the help of store staff, or the visual aids and suggestions available in-store when trying to put outfits together. Participants who lack confidence when shopping rely on in-store sources for inspiration and suggestions to guide their decisions. Stephanie describes this:

> In Warehouse or Oasis, the staff are really helpful and everything is nicely laid out. They've mannequins [...] and it's colour coordinated, with nice suggestions for what to wear together, that helps me a lot.

The social dynamic changes when shopping online, however it is not eliminated. Online brand suggestions are important in this instance for encouraging online shopping, and work like in-store suggestions. Brands may also use visual sensory enabling technologies to deliver product information similar to the information obtained from direct product examination (Kim and Forsythe, 2009). Participants highlighted this:

> Boohoo just have a picture of clothes on a mannequin, but ASOS have clothes on a model so you see it in motion. I wanted a full length dress for the Science Ball and in the pictures it looked full length but when you went to the catwalk you see how it fits when they're walking and see it's not actually full length (Aoife).

> Online is great for seeing ideas and different ways of wearing clothes. You see the clothes on models, it's easier to judge because you're seeing it on a person (Joanne).

These features allow consumers to enjoy more tangible online shopping experiences, resulting in a reduction of perceived risk. Fashion blogs and social media may be useful for brands as participants indicated friends send them links to brand offerings through Facebook, thus allowing them to maintain a social interaction when shopping online:

> My friends send me links on Facebook for clothes websites they have seen [...] it heightens my awareness of brands (Aisling).

Therefore, although online shopping changes the nature of the social dynamic, it does not eliminate it. The shopping experience changes, but participants still rely on friends to recommend products/brands and seek their approval through SNSs before purchasing online. Thus, interaction changes from face-to-face, to online. Generation Y are technology savvy and with the growth of SNSs, linking brands to them to create awareness could be useful for allowing consumers to engage with and seek their friends' opinions about possible fashion purchases online. Online brand managers may replicate the benefits of shopping offline by offering a facility allowing people to share potential purchases on SNSs, such as Facebook, to receive feedback from friends. This would offer peer reassurance, otherwise missing when shopping online.

Additional risks and risk limitation online. Consumers perceive a greater number of risks shopping online (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2000; Kau *et al.*, 2003). These participants try to limit these risks by using brands they feel comfortable with and have experienced before:

> I'm inclined to stick to the websites of shops I normally use offline, like River Island and a\wear (Lisa).

Findings suggests consumers' relationships with established brands offline offset risk concerns when shopping with the brand online. This supports the notion of a brand as a risk-reducer (Seock and Norton, 2007). However, somewhat contradicting this view,

participants believe shopping online with certain offline brands is untrustworthy and deceiving. Specifically, when extra charges apply:

> I bought clothes online on Hollister and Abercrombie & Fitch for €100, but I was charged €30 extra that wasn't mentioned when I ordered. Because of that, I'm not as favourable to online (Lisa).

> I bought from Abercrombie and when it came we had to pay a lot more in charges so it ended up very dear. It's deceiving and misleading (Deirdre).

For these participants, extra charges applied after purchase left them feeling unfavourable towards online shopping and these brands. Similar risks are evident when participants talk about spending online as they are less aware of what they spend, and believe it is deceitful as they unknowingly over-spend:

> Paying with a credit card, you're deceived into spending. If I handed €150 across the counter, I'd die more inside than putting a card into a machine. You don't remember how expensive it was (Lisa).

These women almost feel cheated when shopping online as they do not remember or realise how much they spend. This leads to them feeling less favourable towards online shopping. One way participants try to limit this is by shopping on web sites allowing them to change the currency so they know the final purchase cost:

> ASOS is a brand where you can change the currency from Sterling to Euro, the currency crossover is really reasonable so I think of them a bit more highly (Aoife).

These findings imply that online it is necessary to make the end price prominent by disclosing the possibility of additional charges where applicable. Allowing consumers to view the price in different currencies may also stimulate purchases as this reduces the uncertainty attached to purchasing online. Perhaps making the price more prominent or bringing it to the consumer's attention earlier in the shopping process will reduce the feeling of being cheated into spending online.

These findings demonstrate how the internet impacts and influences Generation Y women when shopping online and offline. Regardless of whether or not a consumer purchases online, the internet may play a role in their decision to purchase. These findings have a number of implications for theory and practice, which are now discussed.

Discussion
This research provides insights on Generation Y women's use of the internet for purchasing fashion brands. It heightens our knowledge of the shopping motives central to the online context and is unique, being the first research of its kind conducted in Ireland. Further, exploratory studies on online shopping are uncommon in the literature. Studies on Generation Y and their use of the internet for online shopping are limited while studies focusing on a specific gender of Generation Y are lacking. Social media and social networks are emerging research areas, and this study offers a contribution by illustrating the significant impact SNSs have on brand consumption and shopping behaviour. Consequently, this paper offers several contributions to theory and practice.

A narrative research approach was employed which allowed the researcher to probe consumers' online brand consumption (Schembri et al., 2010; Shankar et al., 2001). Past studies on online shopping primarily used quantitative methodologies (Andrews et al., 2007; Cho and Workman, 2011; Hansen and Jensen, 2009; Jayawardhena et al., 2007). While these studies provided valuable insights into internet usage, a qualitative

approach was deemed more appropriate in this context. This allowed online female consumers within the highly computer literate Generation Y cohort to express their experiences in their own words. This was beneficial as consumers' stories offer valuable insights into their consumption experiences (Thompson, 1997). Adopting a narrative perspective has much to offer researchers as narratives are interpretive tools that allow us to comprehend how consumers structure and make sense of their shopping experiences (Shankar *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, this study contributes to theory by applying qualitative methods in studying online shopping. This research expands the online shopping literature by allowing participants to talk at length about their experiences, and exploring, rather than testing, consumers' relationships with brands online.

Primarily, this work shows how the internet influences Generation Y women when shopping for fashion brands online. Theoretically, this research broadens our understanding of fashion brand relationships, and confirms and extends previous findings on online shopping motivations (Bhatnagar *et al.*, 2000; Seock and Norton, 2007) by offering additional insights, such as how additional facilities makes online shopping increasingly convenient for Generation Y. This research also contributes to the growing literature on social media by illustrating, for example, how SNSs allow participants to create virtual impressions. Findings show SNSs strongly influence female consumers through enhancing their online shopping experience (McCormick and Livett, 2012). Further, participants use SNSs as information sources to guide fashion purchases. Through pictures, participants view SNSs similar to company-owned web sites as they see others wearing brands and then search for the brand online or in-store. Therefore, this suggests traditional sources of influence on fashion brand consumption are enhanced through social media, and illustrates how other consumers, and not just the brand, are active co-producers of the value and meaning of a brand (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

Further theoretical contributions are evident in the influence the internet has on female consumers. We find Generation Y consumers use the internet for searching, comparing and accessing information (consistent with Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004), and as a method for narrowing their choice set so they will not be confused by too many choices offline (Chernav, 2003). The internet allows participants to create their desired self-image due to the variety of unique brands available, reflecting a desire for self-expression and contribution to one's self-image (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006). Findings also suggest a change in social dynamic when shopping online as, although participants are away from the helpful suggestions and opinions of store staff and friends, they can seek opinions through social media and find suggestions from brands web sites. Valuable insights are offered about Generation Y women and their fashion behaviour, such as how they actively seek brands that allow them to differentiate themselves. This is a crucial market segment with limited empirical research (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2010), especially in relation to online shopping and fashion. Therefore, this research allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how women engage with the internet when shopping.

This research makes several contributions to practice. SNSs drive brand consumption as participants are unwilling to wear an outfit twice, especially if it has appeared on SNSs. This is due to their desire to self-present, and is important for brand managers as SNSs create a need for participants to constantly shop to enhance their self-image. Consumers use the internet to inform and engage in consumption, searching online for products before shopping offline. Thus, the internet simplifies choice and reduces confusion before shopping offline. As participants shop online before shopping offline,

it is important brand managers entice them to browse online to attract them to the store. This might be achieved by offering a discount on their web site redeemable online or in-store, or by running a SNSs competition with links to the brand's web site to raise awareness. Some consumers perceive additional risks when shopping online, viewing the internet as deceptive and untrustworthy, particularly when faced with unexpected charges. Consumers are less aware of what they spend online, and ultimately feel cheated by the brand. Therefore, brands should highlight when additional charges apply to minimise risks and prevent feelings of deception. Providing currency converters so the approximate cost is known may limit risks and avoid disappointment at a later date. An additional way to target consumers may be by emphasising how online shopping fits with their lifestyles, and by highlighting the vast selection of unique products available. Managers could also emphasise how online shopping aids self-expression and construction of the desired self-concept, factors vital for Generation Y. By emphasising a wide selection of unique products easily accessible online, managers may tap into a consumers desire to differentiate themselves. Brands could link their web site to SNSs to allow consumers to interact with their friends and enhance the social experience when shopping online. For brands limited to an online presence, replicating the social experience of shopping in an internet context through integration with social networks may attract customers who would otherwise prefer shopping offline. Additionally, providing detailed product descriptions or having visual sensory enabling technologies will aid online shoppers and create tangible experiences (Kim and Forsythe, 2009).

Limitations and future research
Limitations of this research provide fertile areas for future studies. This study was carried out using a female-only sample. Many authors propose gender has a noticeable effect on shopping behaviour (Bakewell *et al.*, 2006; O'Cass, 2000). Therefore, future research could explore male Generation Y consumers and compare results to note any potential gender differences. As the purpose of this research was to contribute to theory and gain a deep understanding of how consumers structure their consumption experiences to make sense of their lives (Shankar *et al.*, 2001), generalisability was not the objective, nor is it the objective of consumer narratives (McCracken, 1988). However, there are issues in generalising the findings to all members of Generation Y. Further, this research is age cohort specific and does not provide insights into other consumer cohorts such as Generation's X or Z. This provides fruitful areas for future research that could address these issues by applying this research to other generational cohorts or across cohorts to allow for comparison in relation to online shopping. Finally, this study was conducted solely on Irish consumers. Important cultural differences may play a part in internet usage and online shopping ability. The internet infrastructure available within a country plays a role in consumers' willingness to shop online. Further, the inability of some online stores to deliver goods to Ireland without excessive charges may impact internet shopping. Future research could benefit from applying this research to explore whether cultural differences exist towards online shopping.

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Further reading

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About the authors
Lorna Ruane is a PhD student in the Department of Marketing at the J.E. Cairnes School of Business & Economics, National University of Ireland Galway. She previously completed a Bachelor of Commerce Degree (Marketing specialisation) and Master of Business Studies in Marketing at the National University of Ireland Galway. Her research focuses on consumers' relationships, brand loyalty, the self, Generation Y and fashion brands. She has previously presented her research at leading international conferences including the World Marketing Congress of the Academy of Marketing Science (July 2011). Her research is funded by an Irish Research Council (IRC) Government of Ireland Scholarship. Lorna Ruane is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: l.ruane1@nuigalway.ie

Elaine Wallace holds a PhD in Marketing from the University of Birmingham, UK, where she was a member of Professor Leslie de Chernatony's Centre for Research in Brand Marketing. She is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the J.E. Cairnes School of Business & Economics, National University of Ireland Galway. Her research explores the antecedents and components of service employee performance, brand champions and saboteurs, and the role of social networks in fostering consumer-brand relationships and brand advocacy. Her research is disseminated in international journal articles and international conference presentations, and she is co-author of *Creating Powerful Brands* (fourth edition). She has developed executive workshops and academic programmes in Brand Management and Branding Strategy. Her research activities to date have been supported by funding from the IRC and the NUI Galway Millennium Fund.

Appendix

Name	Age	Occupation	Nationality
Aoife	20	Undergraduate student – final year	Irish
Laura	19	Undergraduate student – first year	Irish
Deirdre	18	Undergraduate student – second year	Irish
Lisa	19	Undergraduate student – second year	Irish
Antoinette	23	Undergraduate student – final year	Irish
Roisin	22	Undergraduate student – third year	Irish
Niamh	20	Undergraduate student – third year	Irish
Kate	23	Masters student	Irish
Aishling[a]	28	PhD student	Irish
Aisling	23	Business analyst	Irish
Joanne	31	Visual standards and freelance make-up artist	Irish
Emese	23	Manager fast food restaurant – part-time commerce student	Hungarian
Julie-Ann	31	Accountant	Irish
Stephanie	30	License auditing – part-time commerce student	German

Note: [a]Name adapted with the addition of an i to avoid confusion between participant responses

Table AI.
Interviewees